

# Heaven's Door – Banana Yoshimoto

first published in 2012 by Shueisha

The place where I spent the last couple of days was the legendary Morioh-cho.

I can still recall Angelo's Rock and Boing-Boing Cape in that crisp breeze as if they were right here in front of me. Even something as bizarre as the Wall Eyes, which mysteriously sprung up from the ground the night after the earthquake, seemed like such a familiar sight as I strolled by the sea.

I had come to Morioh-cho on behalf of my parents; an old friend of my father's passed away, and since they were too busy, I wound up being the only one who could go to the funeral.

Morioh-cho hadn't changed at all since the time I briefly lived there in middle school: the rows of elm trees were lined up all the same, and not even the shadow of the earthquake's repercussions loomed

over the city, almost unceremoniously so. Or rather - maybe that shadow was so dark that people had simply accepted things as they were, albeit with a heavy heart. That's what kind of place Morioh-cho is: a town where depth, eeriness and levity coexist.

Considering that most people don't get to marry someone they've been dating since middle school and lead such a peaceful, smooth sailing existence, I can say I've been extremely lucky.

During my days as a transfer student in Morioh-cho, I fell in love with Yutaka, a boy who happened to sit next to me, and that love had a seriousness that's not typical of kids. But perhaps that's exactly what made it so earnest: it was a kid's first love.

We would walk together hand in hand under the elm trees in Jozenji street and simply think to ourselves that we were so happy we could die. Just sharing a Mont Blanc and drinking the delicious but pricey coffee at Hoshama Café together, or looking up and seeing his face was enough to make my heart pound and my breath hitch to the point of self-annihilation.

Despite that, somewhere deep inside, we were at peace. It was a bizarre, unchanging feeling, like I had finally found my real hometown.

Our relationship continued nonchalantly all the way through middle school. We did our homework and walked together, and although we never exchanged more than chaste kisses, we were perfectly happy and at ease. Assured by the firm knowledge that we had all the time in the world ahead of us, we didn't fret. Even after my father's project as an architect in Morioh-cho came to its conclusion and we moved back to Tokyo, our romance continued.

Yutaka was accepted at a private university in Tokyo, and with the fervent intent of studying American literature and becoming a translator, he strode forward with his dream and me in mind. From then on we spent more and more time together.

We went on low budget trips to America to see the settings of his favorite novels and we pretty much lived together. Since our relationship was so long lasting, our parents weren't opposed, their only remarks being along the lines of "you could stay at our house too every once in a while!".

Wishing to work in the medical field, I studied osteopathy. Being able to read and categorize people's afflictions just by touch made for a challenging but fun job. Since the clinic was in a residential district, we had nothing but regulars, which made relations with the public a non-issue.

As soon as Yutaka received his PhD and became a professor, we got married.

What still puzzled me was our parents; at our wedding his mother tearfully confessed that, since "young love that burns bright also burns out quickly", she always worried that she'd never see me again. She had always thought of me as a daughter, so the idea of being separated scared her.

Yes, it was the strangest of weddings, what with our parents crying their eyes out after being freed from this perennial anxiety. We just beamed throughout the whole ceremony. We had always believed we would get married and declared it publicly, but nobody really believed us as children. Because of that, we were filled with the distinct feeling known as "I told you so". We both quietly followed our own pace.

The image of Yutaka's back as he studied was the most precious thing in the world to me, and I believe he also treasured knowing that if he turned around I'd be there all dressed up, looking at him.

Our tastes overlapped too: boiled Tofu to heal fatigue, spicy curry for insomnia, bread and fruit instead of miso with rice in the morning. What a lucky thing, that only I could be so attuned to his body.

We somehow became one; it felt like there was another "me" on the outside that we loved more than our own selves.

I'd be lying if I said we never had our issues. When we were about to graduate from middle school, an upperclassman called Miyoko Sakaguchi got a huge crush on Yutaka. It was a fervor that rivaled Yukiko Yamagishi's obsession for Koichi Hirose.

She fell in love like a woman possessed, always staring at him and trying to ambush him. She felt nothing but envy, hatred and annoyance for me.

While Miyoko was a beauty with long black hair and

a mysterious air around her, I had the banal kind of good looks that belong to thousands of other people. Deep inside, my heart grew anxious.

She had an exotic beauty and a delicate figure, good grades, she was diligent and beloved by teachers – if she pursued Yutaka passionately enough, even he would fall at her feet eventually. That thought made my stomach turn.

Her hair wasn't a deadly weapon, and Yutaka didn't have Echoes to protect himself, so this stalemate went on for years. When I left Morioh-cho, it was with the grim conviction that sooner or later Yutaka would choose her and leave me.

I received a lot of silent calls. I could hear her sobbing on the other side whenever I picked up the phone. I listened quietly for a while. I tried telling her “Sakaguchi, there's nothing I can do”. But she just kept crying. That crying voice, moody like the rain, still lingers in my ears. It was a sad, beautiful sound.

Then this story came to a grim conclusion.

At 18, she left her house in the dead of night, going missing until her body was found on the outskirts of Morioh-cho.

On that very day, even after hundreds of love confessions, she had once again poured her heart out to Yutaka, to which he, also once again, honestly replied: “I don’t want to see you ever again. If I pass my university admission test I’m going to leave and get married, so just give up on me already”. Unable to accept this, she sneaked out at night and waited for Yutaka to come home, hidden in his backyard. But Yutaka didn’t intend to go home: the situation with Sakaguchi had exhausted him, and he took the nighttime shinkansen to spend the night at my place.

We laughed happily along with my parents, distracting Yutaka from the bad taste he was left with. While our parents jokingly encouraged us to get engaged already □ while we ate shabu shabu and cake □ while we took a warm bath and slept peacefully in the safety of our house □ Miyoko Sakaguchi was being kidnapped by a criminal from a nearby town, raped, killed, and left to rot on the outskirts of Morioh-cho.

Our relationship suffered a small but long-lasting toll.

Yutaka didn't give up: he passed his admission test and came to Tokyo, but I could see that he was troubled by the rumors that were spreading back in Morioh-cho and the hatred that Sakaguchi's family and friends had for us. A heavy shadow had been cast on our love.

And yet, we started anew.

We tried our best to protect our precious everyday life. As I sat and made bento in Yutaka's tiny room, and as he drove me home and stayed the night, our wounds healed little by little.

After the wake I spent the night in a hotel and, the following morning, took a train headed to Matsushima, where I then rode on a tour boat.

When the boat took off, flocks of seagulls followed, loudly begging for food. Their eyes, perpetually wanting, craving, reminded me of Miyoko

Sakaguchi's eyes, filled with impossible desire, not content with just looking.

Yutaka and I once ended up taking pity on Miyoko and let her tag along on one of our dates. Just like a group of regular high schoolers, we took the ferry to Matsushima and walked along the shoreline.

Thinking back on that day, I realized that this was the first time I've been back to Morioh-cho since the accident, so I took the opportunity to try and ride this boat of memories alone to earnestly mourn Miyoko.

Everything seemed unchanged from that day: the Nioh boulder, the neatly aligned oyster farms, the placid sea, the silhouette of the small, beautiful islands and their flourishing pines, the seagulls, and the bright blue sky.

It seems peaceful now, but locals say the earthquake

had destroyed bridges, wiped away rocks, felled pines, and all around ravished the area. “Those tiny little islands took the brunt of the tsunami’s force and weakened it - that’s what saved us”, they say.

I looked at the islands and the sea, both quiet as if nothing had happened, with a prayer in my heart.

“ I commend this beauty, and I fear both the natural forces that protected the lives of this town’s people, and those that took them away. May the soul of Miyoko Sakaguchi, who rests in this land, finally be at peace.”

That day in our youth, Miyoko seemed surprised and a little embarrassed when we invited her. When she looked at me her eyes were like cold water, but when she glanced upon Yutaka they turned so fiery that they looked like they could burn you.

Weirdly, I was the one who felt like the third wheel,

like a sad ghost just tagging along. Miyoko was livelier than ever, not missing a single one of Yutaka's words, steps and actions.

Just once, as I gave her half of my anpan and some tea, she cheerfully smiled at me. I smiled back happily. Immediately after, she made a face that screamed "why on earth did I smile at her?" and turned bright red – it was cute.

That was our first and last genuine interaction. No matter how you slice it, our sad relationship was beyond saving.

In the real Morioh-cho, there is no Josuke running to the rescue of a friend in trouble. If you walk by the local Awson, you won't find Reimi Sugimoto and Alfred, the ghostly protectors of the city. We have sesame honey dumplings and beef tongue, but no Josuke and Yasuho awkwardly helping each other. Miyoko Sawaguchi wasn't killed by Yoshikage Kira □

just by some scum from around here. Her parents will certainly hate Yutaka forever. There's always someone in the street guarding some secret tragedy, but no one will witness Rohan Kishibe pry the real story out with Heaven's Door.

No matter how much we protect our conscience, wickedness will rise from people's hearts to hurt others again and again. It has never stopped being this way since Dio's times.

Reality is so sad.

I voiced that thought quietly after I told Yutaka about my mourning prayer in Matsushima. He nodded.

“ But Joseph, Jotaro and Josuke live in our hearts. Reimi and Arnold are standing proud and noble by the Awson mailbox. Even now, Yasuho and Josuke are out there somewhere getting each other out of a rough spot. As long as the human soul's strength doesn't disappear, they'll be with us. That golden spirit has always been here.” As he said that, Yutaka pointed to his chest.

“ That day in Matsushima, when I watched your earnest expression as you suggested inviting Sawaguchi because you felt bad for her □ that’s the exact moment I decided to marry you. What happened to her is horrible, but we can’t do anything about it. We’ll live on and take our children to that town one day, and maybe that’ll be our solution. It will be a proper memorial. To protect what matters to us at all costs: that’s the best we can do.”

“ You read too many comics” is what I wanted to snap back. But as I looked at him, I found myself speechless as tears welled up in my eyes.